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ABSTRACT

Many factors make it difficult to identify a teacher formally as incompetent and to act on that identification once it is made. These factors include time constraints, bureaucratic requirements, and reluctance to face emotional stress. Once a poor teacher is identified, efforts are rarely made to help the teacher improve. Unsatisfactory performance can be found in any of several aspects of a teacher's job, including subject area knowledge, ability to impart that knowledge, ability to maintain discipline, and others. The causes for poor performance can lie within the teacher, within the school, or in outside factors affecting the teacher. Remediation for teachers can take such forms as goal setting, instructional input, modeling, practice, counseling, environmental change, and others. The reasons why such improvement efforts are rarely undertaken may include lack of time or funding, but may also have to do with the fact that as organizations, schools are conservative and tend to try to minimize risk rather than seeking to maximize gain. Teacher evaluators tend to prefer to identify incompetent teachers as competent rather than risk identifying competent teachers as incompetent. Evaluation systems should be revised to allow for more effective remediation. (PGb)

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After the Identification of Incompetence: Then What?

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Education sponsored by the Nebraska Department of Education,
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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses difficulties associated with identifying teacher incompetence and with providing remediation for teachers once incompetence is identified. The paper draws on the work of Edwin Bridges of Stanford University in its approach to the issue of remediation. The paper also argues that the teacher evaluation model in current vogue is risk averse and guards against what statisticians label Type Two errors.

This presentation will discuss a topic that does not normally receive a great deal of attention.¹ What happens when a teacher is identified as incompetent? It is an area of staff development and evaluation to which we pay too little heed.

As a way of warming to the topic, let me tell a story.

It seems there once were two university professors who were bowling along a Nebraska country highway at something more than the speed limit set by Washington bureaucrats. The professors were off for a bit of fishing and had all the visions appropriate to fishing floating before their eyes. Beer, calm water, plenty of action, sunsets--that sylvan panorama and universe that fishermen always imagine.

As the car went by a group of farm buildings at the crest of a rise, an avalanche of hens cascaded from behind a steel sided building on to the highway.

TOOT! TOOT! went the car's horn as it and the companion professors sped toward the flock of chickens. The driver professor slammed on the brakes. But it was too late. Right though the herd of chickens plowed the two professors. "Asked for it," commented the professor's companion, a dour teacher of rhetoric and grammar while feathers flew.

As the driver professor pulled his car to a stop to survey the damage--two chickens lying dead and another flopping about with a broken wing--a denim covered, ruddy complexioned, and obviously exercised farmer marched toward the car. Loping along behind him was a boy of about fourteen.

The farmer picked up the flopping chicken and methodically wrung its neck. Then he turned to the professors as if seeking further necks to wring. "Is that the way for a person to go raging past a man's house," he demanded. "Why could you not honk your horn."

"I did," said the professor, "three times."

"I'll have to ask you gentlemen for your names and addresses to give to the constable." said the farmer.

"What," yelled the professor's companion professor, "you can't let your chickens go wandering all over a public highway and expect the police to do anything about it."

The professor, as he was closer to the farmer, nodded timidly. "Of course, I am willing to pay you for the chickens," he said.

At this the ruddy hue of farmer's nose mellowed. "I can't take less than ten bucks a piece," he said.

"Ten bucks!" shouted the professor's companion, leaning toward the open window on the driver's side. "That's robbery."

The farmer favored the speaker with a withering glance. "Well, then give me seven dollars a piece," replied the farmer.

To shorten the story, the bargain was struck. The farmer agreed. Money changed hands. After a constrained farewell, the professor and his companion slipped over the rise of land headed for their lake, their mental visions now somewhat less tranquil.

The old farmer handed the dead chickens to the boy. "Take these into your mother, boy. Tell her I'm ready for my dinner. And feed those hens before you sit down to the table."

The boy nodded and disappeared. Presently he returned. In one hand he carried a bucket of feed; in the other an old bugle. He walked out into the highway and emptied the bucket right into the middle of the highway. Then he blew on the bugle: TOOT! TOOT!

Everyone of those chickens made a dart for the pile of feed in the middle of the highway.

There's a moral to this story. Unfortunately the professor and his companion professor cannot appreciate the moral for they

did not have the advantage of seeing what transpired after they departed. There is, I would point out, a similarity between the two professors leaving the scene in some ignorance and a principal leaving the scene of a teacher evaluation in some ignorance. One might state the moral in Shakespearian terms, "All is seldom what it seems." There might be a companion moral as well, having to do with what happens to schools after the professors leave, but I'd prefer not to dwell on that thought.

The topic of this paper is "After the Identification of Incompetence, Then What?" What do you do with a teacher whom you have begun to believe is incompetent. Someone unused to the way in which educators behave might say, "Well, that is simple. Fire 'em." "Get rid of them." But, as we all know, it is not that easy.

Consider this. We seldom come right out and accuse someone of being incompetent. There are a whole lot of reasons why we hesitate to do so. First, we may be making a mistake. In fact, I think teacher evaluation is zealously cautious and bends over backwards to avoid making mistakes. I will suggest later in this presentation that the educational system is inclined to guard itself against what statisticians call a Type Two error.

Second, we run the risk of creating more trouble for ourselves than we want to tackle, particularly if the teacher challenges one's vision of incompetence. It is hard work to document

incompetence for that means a fairly specific set of pedagogical expectations, a variety of evaluation techniques, much paperwork to satisfy equity and due process rights, and no small degree of administrative anxiety that perhaps no one else will side with the administrator when the incompetence becomes public.

Third, it is extremely difficult to tell someone they are not doing well and get a constructive reaction from that person. Life is not easy and for most of us it is hard to be the bearer of bad tidings. This is not to deny that there are people out there who delight in lofting criticism at others; there are. But those individuals who take pleasure in telling people what a lousy job they are doing do not make it very well in educational settings.

So one theme relating to what happens when you identify incompetence is that it is hard to carry the bad news to the place where it should be heard.

Another theme all mixed up in the identification of incompetence has to do with one's own agenda. So we have unearthed an incompetent teacher. Is our judgment correct? Is it possible, given the social richness found in school organizations, that impartial judgment may be hard to find. Is there reason to examine why one has judged a particular teacher to be incompetent? There may be. One may also be after getting even for an earlier wound.

Not incidentally, the why question will sometimes be beaten about in teacher rooms. Does one want a new teacher who may do a newer and better job? Does one want the same teacher made suddenly and miraculously competent? Does one want some unacceptable condition to cease (for example, many teacher dismissals occur because the teacher in question does not enforce proper discipline²)? Is one interested in finding an example--a poor teacher--whose demise will serve to straighten up the rest of an indolent staff? Does one merely want a better learning environment for children? Or maybe one is simply looking about--evaluating because it is required--and stumbles upon incompetence by chance.

Thus, part of the mystery that occupies the territory around the identification of incompetence has to do with what it is that someone wants. That is a real part of the equation for it will affect what the administrator does.

Another theme relating to the issue of identifying incompetence, has to do with what one can call the constraints under which administrators operate. Sometimes administrators know of incompetence but simply have neither the time, energy, nor resources to deal with it. For example, if a school has a busy administrator who has only a flimsy teacher evaluation program and an hostile and aggressive teacher union, there is the strong possibility that incompetence will escape attention.

But, another part of the equation--the one I want particularly to address--will have to do with the causes of that incompetence. What is the problem? Again, as with chickens, professors, and Nebraska farmers, not all is what it might seem. The causes of incompetence can be highly complex and intansigent to sweeping and general solutions.

The Michigan Court of Appeals (Beebee v. Haslett Public Schools, 66 Mich. App., 718-726 (1979)) gives us as good a catalogue of the types of incompetence about which we worry. That court said schools boards should consider deficiencies in:

- 1) knowledge of subject area
- 2) ability to impart that subject area
- 3) manner and efficacy of a teacher's discipline over students
- 4) rapport with teachers and parents
- 5) the teacher's physical and mental ability to withstand the strain of teaching.

One may be able to add other areas to the courts catalogue. But generally, when we think we have uncovered incompetence, it is probably because a teacher is not functioning well in at least one of these five areas.

Why the incompetence? Should school administrators try to identify the causes of incompetence and do something about it? My answer is yes. Lets label--we like to label things in education--it remediation. Edwin Bridges of Stanford University calls remediation the "intellectual Sahara of the voluminous literature on teacher evaluation and dismissal."³ What have you read about

remediation of poor teachers? Very little I would guess.

Generally, we would rather that the poor teacher just didn't rock the boat or if we must pay attention to such, we would rather get rid of the poor teacher as quickly, quietly and inexpensively as we can. Thus, we do not give a whole lot of thought to what we might do to make the poor teacher a better teacher. Nor do we question our definition of what it is that makes the poor teacher a poor teacher. This is not to say that teacher evaluation is one of the most difficult things an administrator does. It is. But it is not made difficult because we question the conventions that define the boundaries of proper teaching.

Steinmetz (1969) suggests that there are three causes of an unsatisfactory performance on the part of an employee:

1) managerial and or organizational shortcomings (i.e. the administrator and administration may be more responsible for the poor teaching job than the teacher); 2) a problem with the employee (i.e. the teacher may be slow, untrained, tired, unmotivated, alcoholic, or psychotic); 3) outside or non-job-related influences affecting the employee (i.e. marital, financial problems, conflicts with children, worry about family members, the demands of some volunteer organization, etc.)⁴

Why should we care about the causes of a teacher's incompetence. Obviously, whether we care may depend on whether or not we have already made a decision to try to remove the teacher from a

particular classroom. But assume with me that in most instances it is better to try to help the teacher address the cause of incompetence as a preliminary to removal. Besides, remember that I said it was hard to carry bad news to people. Well, it is less hard to carry a mixed message. "Frank, I don't like to tell you that you are doing a lousy job. You are. However (and you say this quickly) we're going to try to do something about it."

When you think about the "doing something about it" phase, Bridges notes there are nine types of treatment or things one can do: 1) goal setting, 2) instructional input, 3) modeling, 4) practice, 5) feedback, 6) reinforcement, 7) therapy, 8) counseling, 9) environmental change. Let me quickly run through what he means by each since some of his categories seem to be rather similar.

Goal setting clarifies exactly what is expected of a teacher. So, if a teacher has a problem, a clear statement of that problem and a clear understanding of the causes of the problem should allow the teacher and administrator to come together and set some specific goals that will result (if achieved) in improvement.

Instructional input simply means that the teacher is granted the opportunity of more knowledge about a problem area in order to address a problem of insufficient knowledge.

Modeling allows a teacher to observe other teachers with the idea that particular skills may be learned as a result.

Practice allows the teacher some sort of setting in which to try out unfamiliar techniques. Role playing, microteaching, a college class--these come to mind.

Feedback is meant to be a direct mirror for the teacher--a Madeline Hunter script session, a video tape session--or any means of providing the teacher with a record of what happened in an instructional setting. And, part of the feedback process would be some sort of meeting (perhaps many meetings) with a supervisor.

Reinforcement can be an avenue to remediation. Attention from others is an example; recognition for positive contributions is another. Such remediation would be of genuine import to a teacher who is cognizant of problems with companion pangs of self doubt.

Therapy refers to treatment programs designed for personal disorders like alcoholism, drug dependency, and mental illness.

Counseling is like therapy except that it provides help in dealing with crisis situations and personal problems not related to disorders.

Environmental changes are obvious. Reassign the teacher; change the room; change the school, etc.

We have labeled causes of poor performance. We have suggested ways to address various kinds of poor performance by providing different types of remediation.

The question is why don't we do more of it? I know some school districts do. But not many I think.

Two obvious obstacles to helping teachers in trouble are time and money. Somebody with limited time has to help; somebody with limited time has to find scarce dollars in scanty budgets. I have no ready answer to these problems other than that there are many school districts where human support for one another is such that time and money are seen as difficulties but not insurmountable obstacles.

It seems right and proper that we try to help teachers improve as a preliminary step to dismissal. Not only that, it seems that we need worry equally about what we call marginal teachers, the ones who aren't doing very well but who aren't so bad we're going to take action. Clearly, we think we are doing some of this with packaged staff development programs like clinical supervision. But, if one step back from such recipes, I think one sees that in general staff development programs typically deal with symptoms and manifestations and seldom the disease or cause.

A teacher's trouble controlling a class may, as Bridges suggests, have administrative roots. Or, as Steinmetz noted, organizational shortcomings may be the root cause. Maybe the teacher has a noisy room right next to some vocational program that involves machinery. Maybe the teacher has a bunch of problem students. Maybe there aren't enough desks. Maybe the teacher is known as Mr. or Mrs. Science in that particular school, teaching 7th grade science, 8th grade science, earth science, biology,

chemistry, and physics as well as serving as the football coach and the basketball coach.⁵ Providing such a teacher with some disciplinary approach like Cantor's assertive discipline may well be a solution that treats the symptom and not the disease. Maybe the teacher has become alcoholic or is having tumultuous troubles with one of his or her own children. One can think endlessly of all the conditions that affect performance.

We need to pay some attention to the cause of incompetence for our solutions may be missing the mark.

I want to try to construct another explanation about we don't spend much time or energy on remediation, on the identification and treatment of incompetence.

As educators we work in organizations that are politically vulnerable. We have to worry about what people think of us. And we do worry. Many know a principal who tells the janitor to make sure all the Lavalier blinds are pulled down to exactly the same level. Any building administrator worries about littering and graffiti. Appearances are important. Public confidence is important.

As a result, schools tend to be conservative organizations. They change slowly. They adopt innovations when they become trendy or legitimate.⁶ In the language of decision analysts, schools are risk averse. In many situation where there is chance, schools will try to minimize risk as opposed to maximizing gain.

"Don't rock the boat," is a universal axiom in the field of educational administration.

Minimizing chance may be a phrase that aptly captures teacher evaluation. To develop that notion, let me describe how I see the process of teacher evaluation as analogous to the hypothesis testing design common to educational research.

A classic and conventional educational research design presents its guiding idea or hypothesis in terms of what is labeled a "null hypothesis." This means that the researcher will expect there to be no difference ("null") between those attributes of a sample population that motivate the study and the same attributes found in the population from which the sample is drawn. It may also mean there is no difference between a treatment group and a control group. This null hypothesis is retained or rejected depending upon statistical procedures which provide the researcher with best guesses as to whether the results of the test are reliable.⁷

Teacher evaluation is similar. The evaluation(s) of the teacher constitutes a test. There is some probability associated with the accuracy of the test. The evaluator has something that resembles the "null" hypothesis by virtue of a repetitive annual or bi-annual summative evaluation system. These repetitive annual summative evaluations suggest that the evaluator operates under an hypothesis like this:

There is no difference between Teacher X and incompetence.

$$H: u_1 = u_0$$

where 1 = teacher being evaluated and

0 = population of incompetent teachers.

If teachers were assumed to be competent, logic suggests that evaluation would be instituted when some cause dictated. Schools don't generally operate that way.

In the real world of teacher evaluation, most teachers most of the time are judged competent by evaluators. In other words, the above null hypothesis is rejected. If that hypothesis is rejected incorrectly, i.e. the teacher has been judged to be different than the incompetent teacher and that judgment is in error, statisticians would refer to such an error as a Type One Error. And, as with research, the factors that determine the seriousness of such an error relate to what action is taken as a result. In the case of the teacher evaluation, no action is taken--the teacher continues to teach. The teacher passes. What is to be hoped is that someone else will identify this incompetence at some point in the future.⁸

Of course, the reason why teacher evaluation is prone to commit Type One errors lies in the nature of the hypothesis that teachers are incompetent unless proven otherwise. The probability of error is controlled by the evaluator. Because of a great number of political and organizational variables, that probability

is set quite low. In other words, evaluators have incentives to reject their hypothesis and are therefore not very critical of "test" results.

There is, of course, another type of error--the Type Two Error. In the scenario above, the hypothesis of no difference was rejected falsely. The result was that an incompetent teacher continued to teach. That same hypothesis can be retained incorrectly. The result is that a competent teacher has been incorrectly labeled incompetent. That is a Type Two error.

Administrators view Type Two errors with extreme caution. If the hypothesis is retained, the administrator is required to take action in order to root bad teaching from the school. But the administrator knows that this decision creates the potential for much trouble--litigation on the part of the aggrieved teacher; staff unrest if the teacher evaluation program is indefinite or imprecise; student disrest; parental complaints; and much paper work.

The result is that we guard against making Type Two errors more than we do against making Type One errors. We would rather erroneously keep an incompetent teacher in a class than erroneously remove a competent teacher from a class.

The moral of this discourse on errors is that we would rather make a type one error in education. We would rather commit a sin of omission than a sin of commission. We would rather err on the

side of not taking action than on the side of taking action. There are multiple realities that cause us to prefer to suppress action in cases involving teachers. Not the least are those surrounding legal issues, political legitimacy and harmonious relations with staff members. Our evaluation system is designed less to provide critical judgment of performance and more to provide protection from external interference.

Consider a teacher's total contribution to the total organization of a school. Think of how a teacher relates to students, how a teacher talks to his barber or her hairdresser about the school, how a teacher may have good relations with a custodian, how a teacher may write positive letters to a newspaper, how a teacher volunteers for committees. Consider the student work that a teacher displays, how willing students are to come to school, how broad is the teacher's pedagogical focus. Consider how students are attracted to particular teachers and not to others. Think about who goes around picking up litter from the school grounds. Think who smiles at the cafeteria workers and thanks them for a meal well done.

Now consider also the formal classroom visit in which the teacher is evaluated. Normally, this process is rigid and institutionalized.

Our evaluation system is narrow. We don't have formal mechanisms for looking at a teacher's contribution in any

wholistic manner. I believe that is one reason why remediation has been of little interest. It may be one reason why staff development programs are generally indirectly related to school duties.

Now, let me return to remediation and attempt to tie this together with some concluding thoughts.

First, we paint ourselves as inept if we find incompetence and take no steps to understand why it exists, particularly in employees who have been with us for a while. We run counter to common sense if we take no steps to protect a substantial human capital investment in a teacher by trying to turn that incompetence into competence.

Second, we need to understand some of the flaws that we have built into our evaluation system. In that we prefer to ignore incompetence (the sin of omission) we do not create much of a press for the need for remediation resources. Since most of the time we know we are going to prefer to err on the side of missing incompetence, we allocate our resources in other areas. Makes sense. Why set aside funds for remediation when we know we will prefer to not have to use them. We do have a more palatable label for the kind of activity that helps incompetent staff grow--staff development. It is possible we need to be more rational in our approach to staff development. That is a topic for another speech.

The gist of my meaning is this: we need to develop appraisal or evaluation systems that are conceived for the well-being of the short and the long range; we need such systems for the health of teachers and schools; we need systems do not demean the complexity of human nature and the mysteriousness of educational organizations.

Lastly, we need to understand that as with professors and Nebraska farmers, not all is as it seems when it comes to incompetence. If we step back and look at what we are doing in turns over a long time frame and from the perspective of a genuinely healthy educational program, perhaps we might be willing to spend more time, energy, and money helping teachers out, particularly those who have been labeled incompetent.

FOOTNOTES

¹Edwin Bridges, *Managing the Incompetent Teacher*, 1984, writes, "Remediation is one of the most important and least understood elements of the teacher evaluation process." p. 30 This monograph is available from ERIC documents.

²Bridges supports discipline problems as the major source of teacher dismissal by stating: "Weakness in discipline emerges as a leading cause for dismissal in every study of teacher failure conducted since 1913 (Littler, 1914, Buellfield 1915, Madsen 1927, Simon 1936, Bridges 1974).

³Bridges, 1984, p. 30

⁴L.L. Steinmetz, *Managing the Marginal and Unsatisfactory Performer*, Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969.

⁵I have not seen evaluation programs that systematically accommodate the unique classroom circumstances surrounding teaching. It seems that a model built thoroughly might well provide some means of handicapping particular teachers for particular adverse conditions.

⁶An insightful analysis of the pace of change in the curricular core of schools appears in Cuban's "Persistent Instruction Revisited," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Sept. 1986, Vol. 68, No.1:7-11.

⁷John T. Roscoe, Fundamental Research Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences, new York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969.

⁸The above discussion of Type One errors and the following discussion of Type Two errors is taken from Roscoe (1969).